

Dominion Telegraph: Lifeline Through the West

Manning the Dominion Telegraph line on the prairies of the 1870s and 80s, noted the oldtimer, was not "cakes and ale". It was coping with sporadic lack of food and fuel, fearful isolation. Métis and Indians hostile in the face of encroachment on their lands. Mud and floods in spring, plagues of mosquitoes in summer, and marrow-chilling cold in winter.

This summer the Humboldt, Saskatchewan location which once served as a western hub of the telegraph line was marked as a national historic site, paying tribute to the communication pioneers who built and maintained the line and underlining the importance of the telegraph system as first transcontinental tie between east and west of the infant Dominion.

By the early 1870s Confederation was a fact, and the new government was at once faced with settling the northwest as well as completing a communications link with British settlements west of the Rocky Mountains. Their first step was to dispatch a force of 500 men to police the northwest. These North West Mounted Police, few in numbers for the territory they had to cover, emphasized the immediate necessity for quick message transmission and in 1874 construction of the Dominion Telegraph was begun.

When completed in 1878, the telegraph line stretched through 1,300 miles of wilderness along the proposed route for the Canadian Pacific Railway from Manitoba to British Columbia, from Selkirk to Winnipeg, westward near present-day Pelly, crossing the South Saskatchewan River at Clark's Crossing 18 miles below Saskatoon, skirting the elbow of the North Saskatchewan River, and thence from Battleford to Edmonton and the Yellowhead Pass.

To keep the line in working condition was a continuous struggle against animals and

the elements. On the plains, buffalo overturned the poles by using them as scratching posts. In wet weather the wire lost so much current passing through uncut leafy groves that it was sometimes impossible to telegraph any considerable distance.

The linemen were stationed at 100-mile distances and travelled over bridgeless and sometimes impassable trails by single-horse buckboard in summer and homemade flat sled in winter. The linemen's "beat" west of Humboldt passed through the desolate Salt Plain, especially forbidding in winter. Often the crushed snow cut the horses' legs so badly that they had to be bandaged. Far from trading posts, linemen had little variety in their menus: bannock, tea, bacon, dried oats were the staples. Often too, provisions would give out or be spoilt by rainwater coming through a leaky shack roof while the lineman was out doing repairs.

In those early days, the telegraph was a literal lifeline through the west. At the Battleford head office a medical book was kept handy and free medical advice was dispensed over the wire—the best that could be done when no doctor was available within a radius of hundreds of miles.

To fill the long prairie days and nights, the telegraph served a social function—as a medium for long-distance checker playing. Players at Battleford challenged those at Edmonton. Later when Qu'Appelle became eastern terminus of the line, local oldtimer Ace McLean dominated the checker circuit. For a time Battleford could produce no match for the ace until a young French-Canadian challenger was brought in. He could speak very little English but succeeded in pointing out the right moves for transmission against Ace at Qu'Appelle, and won every game until interest died out.

The North West Rebellion of 1885 brought the telegraph to the country around Battleford, Saskatchewan, and kept the wires busy. Clark's Crossing, at the southern point of a triangle formed by Duck Lake in the west and Battleford in the east, was the area telegraph station. J. S. Macdonald of Edmonton, an operator who ultimately rose to become General Inspector of the Government Telegraph Service, gave this account of the times:

"Late one evening a courier brought from headquarters a number of important telegrams, most of which contained instructions to various Canadian governors regarding the movement of troops. I had already started reading these when the wire ceased working. From the fact that a slight current came through I knew that the wire was on the ground.

"By five o'clock the following morning the lineman and I were on our way eastward, taking the despatches with us. After some 20 miles we came upon the wire lying on the ground for a distance of about 100 yards.

"To effect a circuit, it was necessary to find a moist place in which to ground the wire, but although we dug some distance we could obtain no sign of dampness. In this dilemma I, being bookish, remembered Gulliver's action at a critical time, and repeating the incident to Joe suggested he follow Gulliver's example. But Joe's sense of decorum was outraged, and he vehemently protested that he had not come from Montreal and risked his life a hundred times among savages to undertake tasks such as this.

"'If we hold him I would return in five minutes and if when I returned the wire was not working he should consider himself discharged, and he would have to get back to Montreal as best he could—which of course was sheer bluff. But on my return the wire was working clearly, and the 'ground' held long enough for me to get the despatches through to their destinations."

Financial control of the Dominion Telegraph was held by private contractors until 1882 when the line was transferred to the federal Department of Public Works. The telegraph proved to be an expensive operation yielding a mere \$50 per month against an expenditure of over \$600. Nevertheless, the line was maintained in continuous operation for nearly four decades. In 1923 private telegraph companies took over the service and the old system was abandoned.

"Shortly after the Scouts left the General's camp to come to the Crossing, it became known that Riel had been taken and the majority of the press correspondents hurried to the telegraph office to advise their various papers. I advised them the General's prohibition, and they all accepted the situation graciously, with one exception. This man stormed and insisted I take his copy despite the General's veto. Finding threats of no avail, he went away and returned an hour later gleefully announcing he had secured a courier to carry his correspondence to Humboldt, the nearest telegraph office, some 60 miles east. I replied that I was much obliged for the information since I

would at once telegraph the operator not to send it—a contingency which evidently had not occurred to him. I believe he must have sent a second courier after the first as his material never reached Humboldt."

And then there were situations when a local had to depend on his imagination and personal resources. Macdonald describes one of his experiences:

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Defining an Architectural Heritage

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The Canadian Inventory of Historic Building (described in the National Historic Parks News, number 4) was launched by the National Historic Sites Service in the summer of 1970 as a ten-year, three-phased survey of historic structures across the country. The program is now one-third the way through the first phase of recording exteriors of 100,000 buildings. Phase two, piloted this autumn, will record interiors of some 7,000 exceptional buildings selected from the results of phase one. A final phase will screen phase two results for those most outstanding architecturally and historically.

Architecture, like a folk song, is an expression of a people. Unlike a song, a building is a durable thing that can be destroyed by a whim in the outburst of "progress" while the song lives on. When it is completed over the next decade, the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building will provide a lasting record of our historic structures, and the human circumstances which gave them form.

Peter Bower and Mariloue Brossard, researchers with the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building, examining photos of an 18th century engraving showing Québec City buildings. The model is one of several used to train recording teams (generally three people) to identify and record buildings to recognize and correctly identify structural features of historic buildings.



